



## Strength in Numbers: How partnerships can show up for communities in the face of catastrophic wildfire

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*The Pure Water Partners program is a collaboration between organizations that support the stewardship of healthy riparian forests for landowners in the McKenzie River Watershed. Through voluntary stewardship incentives, partners help landowners assess their properties and provide resources to protect and restore riparian forests in an effort to maintain clean water, healthy habitat, and fire resiliency. During the Labor Day fires in 2020, the already-existing Partnership faced many challenges in supporting the wildfire recovery effort, and were able to shift their operations towards immediate on-the-ground support for those affected. Nancy Toth from Eugene Water & Electric Board and Lily Leitermann from the Upper Willamette Soil & Water Conservation District joined BEF's Julia Jaquery to discuss the Partnership's key role in wildfire response, recovery, and future resiliency efforts for the McKenzie River watershed community.*

**JULIA JAQUERY:** Tell me about the Pure Water Partners program and the conditions that led to its formation—what is the program's vision for climate-adapted rural communities?

**NANCY TOTH:** The Pure Water Partners Program began around 2014. It was a collaboration between a number of different watershed organizations and agencies in the area. The idea for it grew out of a proposed drinking water protection and floodplain ordinance in Lane County in 2010 that drew the anger of a lot of upriver residents. Long story short, that whole effort failed.

Karl Morgenstern, the Water Resource Supervisor at the time, had an idea to create a program that was purely

based on voluntary engagement and stewardship upriver. The initial concept was to focus on protecting healthy riparian areas in floodplain forests, because so much funding is dedicated to restoration. We wanted to have a way to reward landowners for maintaining healthy riparian areas and provide them with financial incentives and technical assistance. At the same time we also acknowledged that there's a lot of restoration that still needs to be done. Thus, we integrated both of those components into the Pure Water Partners Program.

The other piece was that we wanted to work together with our partner organizations to achieve common goals in a more efficient and effective way

Photo Credit: Nancy Toth

than each of us pursuing individual grant opportunities here and there. Instead, we wanted to try to create a more programmatic approach to protection and restoration. In terms of climate adaptation, we're hoping that we can help protect water quality while also building resilience in local communities to some of the increasing natural disasters we've seen.

**LILY LEITERMANN:** We had a soft launch of this collaborative model in 2018. We eventually moved away from a pilot phase into working through the program and seeing if everything we had tested in the past was functioning properly. That phase was in place for a couple of years before the Holiday Farm Fire happened, so we already had an established framework for working together leading into the fire. We were able to pivot everything once the fire hit, and our focus expanded dramatically from just water quality protection and restoration. Suddenly, we had to focus on this immediate disaster and the response to pull together our resources quickly. The structure that we had in place for funding really helped leverage more dollars and also positioned many people out on the ground quickly so that we could use or adapt our existing assessment tools to emergency response.

Out of that experience and moving forward, many aspects of the program have changed. For instance, there is more focus on fuels reduction than we planned as part of the last iteration of the program. As for climate adaptation and resilience, pre-fire that was a big goal, but it wasn't in our face so much. Now we are asking, what are the actual impacts of a natural disaster on the community, and how many resources are needed to recover and be resilient? What does resilience mean to us and these communities? We are reimagining our role in the community as a part of that resilience, helping people immediately after the fire and talking to them about their concerns for their property and how to replant an area or recover the ecological conditions. But also, the community social aspect is much more at the forefront of our thinking now. How well are people connected to each other? What are the resources they need? And how are we partnering with local community organizations to support preparedness and resiliency?

**JJ:** Did your partnership expand after that event to include those community organizations? Or did organizations in the existing partnership take on new roles and responsibilities?

**LL:** The partnership didn't formally expand, but we started working with more community organizations. We also started working more closely with the Oregon Department of Forestry and McKenzie Fire and Rescue, but again, not formally, just in more conversations and through grant applications. The roles and responsibilities of the partnership organizations also shifted in many ways, like the expansion of the number of staff members, new types of roles they were playing, and the structure of decision-making.

**NT:** Before the fire, we were calibrated to deal with a certain pace of landowners entering the program. Post-fire, that pace increased dramatically. We needed to expand quickly to meet that demand,

and in addition to the work that we took on, we also worked with additional partners. For instance, we worked with Lane County and their new permit navigator, whose job was created to help McKenzie residents with the recovery and rebuilding process. We wanted to make sure to connect landowners with the appropriate resources around permitting and rebuilding. We also referred landowners to other agencies with different forms of assistance. For example, the PWP does a broad property assessment, but our expertise is not in working in the upland portions of their land. So we might refer them to NRCS or ODF, or other agencies that might be able to provide that type of assistance.

**JJ:** What are the responsibilities of each of your organizations within the partnership?

**NT:** Interestingly, in the beginning, EWEB [Eugene Water & Electric Board] led the formation and funding of this



Photo Credit: Nancy Toth

partnership, but over time, EWEB has stepped back and other organizations have stepped forward as they have built capacity. It is a good working collaborative in that sense. One entity has to sign the agreements with landowners and EWEB was in the position to do that; we have lots of easements with customers for property access in our organizational model. EWEB signs the protection and restoration agreements with landowners in this partnership and does a lot of program coordination, supported by the other organizations. After the fire, the McKenzie Watershed Council, the Upper Willamette Soil and Water Conservation District [UWSWCD], and McKenzie River Trust were the core organizations that sent project managers out on the ground to do the property assessments for landowners, collect the data, write up the recommendations, coordinate the work, etc. At the beginning, EWEB provided the majority of the funding, but post-fire, we were able to bring in a lot of emergency response grant money, and in the same timeframe, the SWCD got a tax base. So that really helped to bring in additional funds.

**LL:** One thing that shifted with the fire was the funding piece — we could leverage more grants, and then getting the tax base changed UWSWCD's role from just being an implementer to a funder. Each organization has dedicated more resources to the Pure Water Partners Program, and specifically to

the Holiday Farm Fire recovery effort over time. There is now a need for daily coordination and communication efforts rather than weekly or monthly, as in the past. There's much more of a team-oriented work structure. Everybody's in it together even though they're responsible for their individual landowner and property management and working for separate organizations.

**JJ:** Can you tell us about the process to secure the federal funding to achieve wildfire resilience goals, and the challenges to applying for and managing this funding?

**NT:** One of the things that EWEB did right away after the fire was dedicate internal funding to start work on the ground immediately, with the expectation that we'd eventually be reimbursed by FEMA or other grants. That timing was essential, because we wanted to start removing hazardous materials and implementing erosion control measures as soon as possible. We had to work through Lane County to apply for the FEMA relief funds, which we eventually received. The FEMA funding reimbursed us for basically all of that initial assessment and implementation work in the first year after the fire. But that took a while; I know that in other watersheds, getting funding to start work was a huge hurdle, because people were waiting for grant funding to come in before they could do things on the ground. We had a great advantage in being able to begin work as soon as we could get into the fire area, while we were simultaneously applying for grants.

We also received some ARPA [American Rescue Plan Act] funding for septic system repairs and replacements. We received two sources of funding; one came through DEQ [Oregon Department of Environmental Quality], and one came through Lane County and Biz Oregon. However, this took over a year to get this funding on the ground. Additionally, we worked with state legislators who assisted us in getting funding for some of our large-scale floodplain restoration projects.

**JJ:** What do you see as the overarching goal for the McKenzie watershed? What would it look like for landowners to be part of achieving that goal, in terms of fire resiliency and riparian health?

**LL:** We have similar goals to when we started the partnership: protecting the sole source of drinking water for Eugene and Springfield, and providing healthy wildlife and riparian habitat. We're re-evaluating the program goals as a collaborative because we've realized that the fire has changed our scope of work at scale, and it's been a challenge for all of us. Also, there's been new staff entering and high turnover, so it's been a challenge to adhere to the original goals and structure of the program and even see the watershed through the same lens we had. It's changed dramatically — the landscape has changed, people have changed, everything has been impacted. We are learning about what it means to have this kind of mega wildfire change the landscape and people. We know what has happened in the short term, but what does it mean for the long term?

Yet, there are challenges to expanding our scope to include things like fuels reduction. It's a big task, and so many factors go into it. We want to be more integrated with the community and the ecosystem than we were in the past and not look just through the lens of solely riparian areas and water quality protection. We've been working hard to focus on the diversity, equity, inclusion, and socioeconomic considerations of who lives along the river and the tributaries who benefit from the types of programs that we've offered, the funding that we've leveraged, and who needs these resources most. We're asking what that means for resilience over the long term, supporting vulnerable people who don't have the means to rebuild or recover quickly from a disaster's impacts.

**NT:** Since the fire, we've also incorporated a "Firewise" aspect to our program. We worked with the University of Oregon Landscape Architecture program for a term; they had a studio class where they paired teams of students up with landowners in the fire area and worked with them on re-envisioning what their properties could look like as they rebuilt, thinking about these Firewise practices. Out of that studio, a graduate student helped to integrate these suggestions and practices into a fire resilient landscaping guide that we now give to landowners. This provides landowners with information they can use to manage their properties with fire resilience in



Photo Credit: Nancy Toth

mind. We also provide technical assistance and incentives for naturescaping on their properties.

**From the National Fire Protection Association:**

“The national **Firewise USA** recognition program provides a framework to help neighbors in a geographic area get organized, find direction, and take action to increase the ignition resistance of their homes and community and to reduce wildfire risks at the local level.”

**JJ:** What have been some of the specific challenges in engaging some underserved or hard-to-reach groups?

**LL:** From the beginning of the fire, we had a lot of resources, and we didn't put any parameters around who received aid. We were helping everyone who asked for it. But as time went by, it became apparent that those with more resources had more of an ability to engage with the available programs because they were starting from a different level of recovery. As we became more aware of these issues in conversations with impacted residents during fieldwork, we noticed that some people needed more help than others. However, determining the correct and equitable path toward allocating those resources was challenging for our organizations. We were asking, what does equity look like? And what is our measure of that? Our organizations have many different interpretations of what that might mean. We started a Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion subcommittee to discuss these concerns. We were all aware that our resources were most likely supporting people who have more resources because they have the means to live along the river, and a portion of them have second homes. The committee worked on a DEIJ intake form to better understand the circumstances of the people entering the program. We paused when we were challenged to think about using that information as a tool for equity.

We hired a DEIJ consultant, the Avarna Group, to help us with a broad scope of work — first, an internal culture assessment and DEIJ lens, what's happening internally with our collaboration, the relationship we have as partners, and next, how we are engaging with the public and effectively providing resources with an equity lens. We also collaborated with the McKenzie Valley long-term recovery group and their caseworkers, who provided their data from a needs assessment conducted post-fire to many residents throughout the watershed. We've had various strategies, but in the meantime, we're still challenged for many reasons. Yet, I am hopeful we will commit to DEIJ as part of the PWP and work toward addressing inequities and injustice.

**NT:** We also reached out to disaster case managers to let them know what our program could offer to residents, which resulted in some follow-up engagement with landowners. From a programmatic approach, it's been really challenging to figure out how best to reach and assist underserved groups, and there doesn't seem to be a lot of concrete examples to draw from in terms of how to accomplish this most effectively. We are struggling with that and hope that we can be in a better place in the future to make sure that these resources are going to people who really need them.

**JJ:** Do you think that, in a similar fashion that you've expanded your collaboration with organizations outside of the partnership, there's an opportunity to do that with medical or social organizations as well?

**NT:** I certainly think there are additional opportunities. For instance, there is a new non-profit called the **McKenzie Community Land Trust** that's working on rebuilding affordable housing. There's a group of agencies working to try to find a better solution for wastewater treatment for the town of Blue River, which was largely destroyed during the fire, and we are trying to work with the county and other organizations to see how we can best support them and protect drinking water quality. We are continuing to partner with the McKenzie Valley Long Term Recovery Group, because they have been successful addressing a lot of the social issues and immediate needs of McKenzie

residents. It is critical to look at the whole picture with this work.

**LL:** I think it's important not to be so siloed, to be specific about how we accomplish our goals in the watershed, and to realize how important it is to be connected cross-sector ahead of a disaster or any event like this. So, even if we don't have a definite connection to a particular organization or group at the time, it's good to have those relationships, especially local and community-based.

For example, our focus is on the environmental aspect of recovery, and we are not trauma-informed care providers or healthcare providers. Immediately post-fire, we were communicating with landowners about what we were there to do: slow or stop harmful erosion, protect the water quality, and restore native habitat. During those first few years and even now, we listened to resident's survival stories and the tragedy they had experienced, and they needed people to listen. Staff listened and offered empathetic responses before, during, and after we talked about the plans to restore and protect their riverbanks. Even if there was nothing that I could immediately offer to them, they very much appreciated someone being there and acknowledging that they had been through a traumatic experience. After the fire, people see a burned landscape, and it looks like everything's dead and won't return. We noticed after the first long winter and we started getting plants growing in the ground, around 200,000 that first year, people saw signs of hope. Planting new growth in a burned landscape actively nurtures healing and regeneration, and intentionally focusing on talking with people about what they imagined their property to look like, or what it looked like in the past and what their memories were, what was important to them and what they valued — all of this cultivated hope and healing. I think they could see that this would not last forever, and there was a chance of recovery or perhaps a different but also beautiful land they could call home and belong to.

One of the things we realized too late and might do differently next time is to provide healthcare resources for our partners, ourselves, or project managers

on the ground. We connected with the Trauma Healing Center in Eugene about a year and a half after the fire and had a few workshops with them, which was helpful. Recognizing the need for trauma-informed care sooner would have reduced stress and PTSD among staff, because they were dealing with a lot of trauma in the field, even if it was secondhand by listening to homeowners talk about their loss. In the future, that would be something that we try to implement immediately.

**Interested in learning more about trauma informed training resources?** Check out [Trauma-Informed Oregon: Workplace Wellness](#) and BEF's [TIC for land and water stewards](#) online training modules.

**JJ:** I'm curious about your interface with agriculture and forestry practices in efforts to do fuels reduction work. For the landowners whose properties neighbor industrial tree farms that are typically very dense, monocrop plantation forests, is there much conversation with the timber industry about how to mitigate fire risk?

**NT:** We have worked with some agricultural and small woodlot landowners to the extent that we can. Small woodlot owners are subject to regulations under the Forest Practices Act and soon the Private Forest Accord, so we have to be careful in this area. Our main focus has been on riparian areas, though we broadened our scope after the fire because there was so much need in the community. Most of the landowners we have worked with are very concerned about fuels reduction, and we were able to get some grant funding through ODF that helped to accomplish some of that work. But there is still a lot more that needs to be done and not a lot of organizations with the resources or expertise to conduct that work at scale. That is an ongoing challenge.

Landowners are also concerned about adjacent industrial lands, because of herbicide spraying and fire risk. We are starting to engage more with industrial timber and look for opportunities where we might be able to obtain easements or work together on larger floodplain restoration projects. Some of these projects that we have done in partnership with the Forest Service, McKenzie Watershed Council and McKenzie River Trust have been

instrumental in reconnecting incised stream channels with their floodplains. This helps to drop out sediment and spread out flows, reducing flooding, and filtering pollutants. Spreading water over a broader portion of the floodplain helps to make the landscape less fire prone and promotes resilience to wildfire. We continue to work with partners and are integrating private timber into these conversations about future projects.

**LL:** PWP has always engaged with agriculture and timber. The watershed supports various crops, hazelnut farmers, forestry, and ranchers. The UWSWCD and EWEB have long worked with those folks to try to reduce the amount of pesticide use and change practices. We wrote an NRCS National Water Quality Initiative Strategic Action plan to engage more with non-industrial private forest land. That said, we have had challenges with sustained engagement. We partner in a Regional Conservation Partnership Program with Sustainable Northwest, partnering with all the organizations/ areas involved in wildfire recovery from the Labor Day fires. That program aims to increase our capacity to assist non-industrial private forest landowners in addressing wildfire impacts on natural resources on private lands. The program



*Photo Credit: Nancy Toth*

allows funding for invasive vegetation management, replanting, other site prep, forest fuels reduction practices, and implementing other resiliency-building practices. If we can make that successful, we hope to build upon relationships with these landowners to have more complex conversations. In the past our model was focused on direct tributaries and riparian areas and less on the upland. The UWSWCD is also going through a planning phase to define strategies that would be appropriate to advance landscape-scale forest health, fire resilience, and watershed quality activities.

**JJ:** Is there anything else you'd like to mention about what the Partnership is currently working on or hoping to work on?

**NT:** We're recognizing the need to eventually move away from this emergency response world that we've been living in over the last couple of years and figure out what our future program direction looks like. We would like to get back to the work we were doing originally, and figure out how to re-engage some of the landowners that we had worked with pre-fire who may have fallen by the wayside as we were responding to the fire. We are embarking on a strategic planning process to map out new and perhaps slightly different goals for the program based on what we have learned since the Holiday Farm Fire. At the same time, we are working to improve our technology for all of the field work and data collection processes to make our systems operate more efficiently. As Lily mentioned, we are also looking to incorporate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice considerations into our work over the long term in a way that is meaningful and supportive of upriver residents. Ultimately we are committed to protecting a valuable drinking water resource, improving the overall health of the watershed, and helping to make the community more resilient in the face of a changing climate.

**LL:** Over the years of building this partnership, a lot of time and attention went into building trust and the collaborative process and ensuring that people in all of the partner organizations felt heard. Through the fire recovery process, we are seeing the effects of that underlying relationship/collaboration as a successful tool for

working together in very stressful times. As time has progressed in the recovery effort, we've had new people enter and leave the staff at each organization, and organizational roles and structures have changed. We've realized that along with that strategic planning, we need to do

more to build and earn trust among all of the members of the partnership. I think that will help us achieve all that we hope to accomplish as a collaborative. In anything that we do together, trust is foundational.

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### Bios:



**Nancy Toth** has worked at Eugene Water & Electric Board (EWEB) for 16 years as an environmental specialist/project manager working to protect the McKenzie River, EWEB's sole source of drinking water. She collaborates with local, state and federal agencies, and landowners in the watershed on voluntary programs to improve source water quality. Nancy has a bachelor's degree in Geography from Dartmouth College and a master's degree in Environmental Science from the University of Oregon.



**Lily Leitermann** has worked at the Upper Willamette Soil and Water Conservation District for 8 years, first as a Watershed Specialist for the PWP and now as the UWSWCD Conservation Program Manager, working to support conservation staff in their great work and develop new programs and strategies that align with the mission and vision of our organization. She collaborates with local, state, and federal agencies and landowners across the District boundaries of Eastern Lane County on voluntary conservation programs. Lily holds a Bachelor of Environmental Studies and Anthropology from Western Michigan University and a Master of Natural Resources from Oregon State University.



Photo Credit: North Santiam Watershed Council